

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Turnbull, William (1922-2012)



***Leaf Venus 2*, 1986**

Bronze on York stone base

Signed with monogram, stamped with foundry mark, dated and numbered from the edition of 4

Cast by Morris Singer, March 1987

132 x 41 x 20.5 cm. (52 x 16 x 8 in.)

Exc. base 116.8 x 41 x 7 cm. (46 x 16 x 2 ¾ in.)

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Provenance:

Waddington Galleries, London
Ann Kendall Richards, New York, June 2000
Private Collection, USA
Osborne Samuel, London

Exhibited:

London, Waddington Galleries, William Turnbull: Sculptures 1946-62, 1985-87, October - November 1987, no. 20,
p.53
Annely Juda Fine Art, From Picasso to Abstraction, June - September 1989
Berlin, Galerie Michael Haas, William Turnbull Neue Skulpturen, October - November 1992, no. 5
London, Serpentine Gallery, William Turnbull: Bronze Idols and Untitled Paintings, Nov. 1995 - Jan.1996, no.45,
p.65
Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York, William Turnbull, October - November, 1998

Literature:

Exhibition catalogue, William Turnbull: Sculptures 1946-62, 1985-87, London, Waddington Galleries, 1987, p. 53,
no. 20, another cast illustrated.
Exhibition catalogue, William Turnbull Neue Skulpturen, Berlin, Galerie Michael Haas, 1992, no. 5, another cast
illustrated.
Exhibition catalogue, William Turnbull: Sculpture and Paintings, London, Serpentine Gallery, 1995, p. 65, pl. 45,
another cast illustrated.
A.A. Davidson, The Sculpture of William Turnbull, Much Hadham, 2005, pp. 51-52, 68, 168, no. 240, another cast
illustrated.

Encountering Leaf Venus 2, what does it suggest? Leaf, or goddess? Close to human scale, its blade-thin, verdigris
form is marked by sparse, discreet indentations.

William Turnbull began to make 'Idols' in the mid-1950s: simplified structures whose totality could be grasped in a
glance. Their presence was primal, evoking - though not mimicking - works from other civilisations. At the British
Museum, Turnbull had studied Cycladic and African sculpture, as well as utilitarian objects, such as spoons, which
possessed symbolic significance. His contribution to the radical exhibition 'This is Tomorrow', in 1956, was Sun Gazer,
a mysterious ovoid on a pedestal. Turnbull amplified his intention in the catalogue:

Sculpture used to look 'modern'; now we make objects that might have been dug up at any point in the past forty
thousand years. Sculpture = totemic object. It can exist inside or outside architectural space.

In 1979, after a gap of seventeen years, Turnbull returned to making 'Idols' in bronze, fashioning a series of small
masks, figures and torsos. The continuity with earlier work is evident, yet there is also difference. In sculptures from
the mid-1980s onwards, such as Leaf Venus 2, sculptural weight and solidity have been replaced by slenderness: an
audacious balancing of wafer-thin forms. Considering such works, David Sylvester recalled Turnbull's question, 'How
little will suggest a head?', invoking by comparison the artist's emptied-out canvases of the 1950s, in which brush-
strokes activate monochrome surfaces.

Amanda Davidson, in The Sculpture of William Turnbull, links the origin of Leaf Venus 2 to drawings of plants made
in Singapore in 1963. 1. Turnbull related it to skateboards used by his sons; a jarring cultural appropriation, but
correlating neatly with Leaf Venus's form, its slim volume and gently curved surfaces. David Sylvester further
suggested aircraft wings, which had been a visual constant during Turnbull's four years as a wartime pilot in the RAF.
2. All are possible, indeed likely.

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Sun Gazer (1959), as distinct from the 1956 sculpture of the same title, was sited outside Kingsdale School as part of an initiative by the London County Council's Architect's Department 'to expose children to the most challenging and experimental manifestations of contemporary art'. 3. Sun Gazer relates directly to Leaf Venus 2. Horizontal rather than vertical, it is essentially a slim leaf form, with ridged and gashed surface markings, although the depth and legibility of this scarring is greater.

In Eugene Rosenberg's photograph of Sun Gazer (1959), a girl in school uniform studies the sculpture. A young teacher looks on, while further pupils can be seen watching from open windows on the upper floor. We can never know what they were thinking, but the placement of the sculpture, against the modernist brick, steel and concrete architecture of Leslie Martin, is undoubtedly daring. Light, and the skilful black-and-white photograph, emphasise the strangeness of Turnbull's sculpture - a space-age found object.

The challenge, with the smoother-surfaced Leaf Venus 2, is to register its presence through photographs: the sculpture's surface lines and dots, ciphers across and around its slender mass, may all too easily be easily missed. Such markings subdivide the leaf, providing symmetry (dots in the centre, lines to the perimeter). Yet the effect, as with Sun Gazer, remains equivocal. Leaf Venus 2 is an object both self-sufficient and referential, clearly articulated and numinous.

1. Amanda A. Davidson, *The Sculpture of William Turnbull* (Aldershot: The Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries, 2005), p. 52.
2. David Sylvester, 'Bronze Idols and Untitled Paintings', in *William Turnbull: sculpture and paintings* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers and the Serpentine Gallery, 1995), unpaginated.
3. Richard Cork, in *Architect's Choice: Art and Architecture in Great Britain since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 34, illustrated p. 35.



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